

## Effort gives workers skills for new careers

Posted by [Keith W. Cooley](#) May 01, 2008 10:00AM

Categories: [Guest Column](#)

Since I became director of the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth a year ago, I've helped create an initiative that carries huge impact for Michigan workers and employers. No Worker Left Behind offers up to two years of free tuition for unemployed and low-income workers to help them into new careers with clear employer demand.

No Worker Left Behind can make the difference between workers and their families being in economic peril and being successfully employed. We're now devoting every available federal dollar we can to supporting No Worker Left Behind.

No Worker Left Behind is a hit. In the first seven months, more than 20,000 people enrolled in training and another 11,000 are on waiting lists. This tremendous response tells me the people of Michigan understand the value of education.

Even though they may not have gone to college in the past, they desperately want to take advantage of the opportunity now. The governor's original goal was to retrain 100,000 workers. The demand is so large that we may exceed that goal by the end of our three-year enrollment window.

This initiative also is popular with employers. A study in January suggests that as many as 30,000 jobs in Michigan could go unfilled in the near future because of the mismatch between current workers and the skills needed for the jobs. We must continue to find ways to train and re-train individuals, steering them into fields where good-paying jobs are available.

We know that education and earnings are tightly linked. Massachusetts has the most educated population, with 37 percent of adults over 25 having at least a bachelor's degree and a per capita income of \$46,255. That's third among states.

Compare that to Michigan, which ranks 34th, with 24.5 percent of adults having at least a bachelor's degree and a per capita income of \$33,784 (26th among states). Michigan has dropped from 16th place in per-capita income over the last six years.

There are no quick fixes to this long-term problem, and dedicating state money is only part of the answer. We are working hard with educators, particularly community colleges, and with Michigan Works! agencies to find ways to make every training dollar go as far as possible.

The governor has asked the Legislature to appropriate general funds to expand the number of people we can enroll in training. On March 20, the House of Representatives adopted my department's budget, including \$40 million for No Worker Left Behind. We need Senate approval before it can be signed into law by the governor.

No Worker Left Behind is our chance to stay competitive in the changing global economy. We owe it to our families, our communities, and our businesses to give our workers the skills they need to compete.

— Keith W. Cooley is the director of the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth.